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ABSTRACT

Stress, coping, and psychological adjustment were compared in single (N=37) and first-time married (N=179) mothers and their young adolescent children. Adolescents completed their questionnaires in school and parents completed theirs at home. Questionnaires measured adolescent stress, behavior problems, perceived competence, and coping; parental stress, symptoms, and coping; and demographics. The results showed that single mothers reported more daily hassles related to economic, family, and personal health problems, and more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychoticism than did married mothers. Single mothers also reported using more coping strategies related to accepting responsibility and positive reappraisal. After controlling for level of family income, differences in family hassles and coping strategies remained significant, but differences in psychological symptoms only approached significance. No differences were found between children in these two family constellations on maternal reports of emotional/behavioral problems nor on children's self-reported emotional/behavioral problems, stressful events, coping, or perceived competence. (Author/NB)

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Stress and Psychological Symptoms
in Single and Dual Parent Families

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Abstract

Stress, coping and psychological adjustment were compared in single and married mothers and their young adolescent children. Single mothers reported more daily hassles related to economic, family, and personal health problems, and more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychoticism. Single mothers also reported using more coping strategies related to accepting responsibility and positive reappraisal. After controlling for level of family income, differences in family hassles and coping strategies remained significant, but differences in psychological symptoms only approached significance. No differences were found between children in these two family constellations on maternal reports of emotional/behavioral problems nor on children's self-reported emotional/behavioral problems, stressful events, coping, or perceived competence. Implications of the these findings for adjustment of single-parent families is discussed.

It is estimated that 60% of children born in 1984 or later will spend some time living in a single parent family as a result of parental separation or divorce. Further, the average length of time spent by children in a single parent home as a result of marital disruption is about six years (Norton & Glick, 1986). As the single parent family becomes a more prevalent and enduring form of family life, it becomes critical to understand the adjustment of individuals in single parent families.

Paradigms concerned with stress and coping processes (e.g., Moos, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) offer a useful perspective to examine the experiences and functioning of members of single parent families. Comparison of levels and types of stressful events, coping strategies, and symptoms of psychological distress in single and dual parent families could provide important information regarding the adjustment of parents and children in these two family constellations.

Although considerable research has examined stressful events and symptoms associated with parental divorce (e.g., Felner, Stolberg & Cowen, 1975; Sandler, Wolchik & Braver, in press), few empirical investigations have been carried out on these factors in single parent families after the initial changes and transitions related to the divorce have passed. In one of the few studies of this type McLanahan (1983) examined the relation between family headship and the presence of chronic strains, the occurrence of major life events, and the absence of social and psychological supports. She concluded that single parent (female) heads of household experience more stress than their married (male) counterparts, but that this was more the result of marital disruption than anything inherent in the single parent role. However, in this study stress associated with being either male or female was confounded with the stress associated with being a married or

single parent. To address this area of needed research, the present study was designed to examine levels of stress and psychological symptoms in single and married mothers, as well as levels of stress and symptoms in their young adolescent children.

Method

Subjects

Participants were 37 single mothers (29 divorced, 8 separated) and 179 first-time married mothers and their young adolescent children living in the rural northeast portion of Vermont. These families are a subset of a sample of 309 families participating in a larger study of stress and coping in young adolescents and their parents. Mothers who had remarried or were living with a new partner, widowed mothers, and mothers who had never married were excluded from the present analyses. Only one child from each family was included in the present analyses. In families where more than one child from the family provided data, one of the children was randomly chosen for the present analyses.

Children ranged in age from 10 to 15 years old with a mean of 12.5 years (S.D. = 1.0) and were attending the sixth through eighth grades. Children in the single- and two-parent families did not differ in age or grade in school. Time since the divorce or separation in the single-parent families ranged from less than one year to 15 years ($M = 3.8$, $S.D. = 3.7$). In a comparison between groups of single-parent families (less than 2 years, 2-4 years, more than 5 years since time of separation), no differences were found among the groups on any of the demographic variables with the exception of maternal education. Women who had been divorced the longest had somewhat less education ($M = 11.6$, $S.D. = .97$) than women in the other two groups ($M = 13.7$, $S.D. = 1.7$ and $M = 13.6$, $S.D. = 2.5$). Further, no

differences among these groups were found on any of the measures of stress, coping, symptoms, or adjustment.

Procedures

All students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in eight rural schools were given a letter of informed consent to take home to their parents. Approximately half of the available families volunteered to take part in the study. Participation was completely voluntary and a \$25 remuneration was given to each family for completion of the forms. Questionnaires were completed anonymously (identified only by a code number for each family).

Students completed their questionnaires at school in small groups of approximately 10 students each with a research assistant available to explain directions and answer any questions. The measures were administered in two 50-minute sessions held approximately one week apart. Students were given an envelope containing questionnaires for their parents and were instructed to take these materials home and return the completed parent forms in a sealed envelope at the second session the following week.

Measures

Adolescent Stress. The junior high school version of the Adolescent Perceived Events Scale (APES; Compas, Davis, Forsythe & Wagner, 1987) was used to measure major and daily stressful events in the lives of the adolescents.

Adolescent Behavior Problems. Self-reports of adolescents' emotional/behavior problems were obtained on the Youth Self-Report (YSR; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987), a checklist of 102 behavior problem items rated "not true", "somewhat or sometimes true" and "very true or often true" of the respondent. Mothers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach

& Edelbrock, 1983). The CBCL consists of 118 behavior problem items which are rated by parents as "not true", "somewhat or sometimes true", or "very true or often true" for their child.

Adolescents' Perceived Competence. Self-perceptions of competence were assessed with the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985), a revision of the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter, 1982).

Adolescent Coping. Adolescents and children completed an open-ended instrument designed to assess coping with self-identified recent stressful events (Compas, Malcarne, & Fondacaro, in press).

Parental Stress. Separate measures were used to assess major life events and daily hassles recently experienced by parents. The Life Experiences Survey (LES) (Sarason, Johnson, & Siegal, 1978) was used to measure infrequent and dramatic life changes. The Hassles Scale (Kanner et al., 1981) was used to measure frequent and less dramatic events. These events were rated for occurrence during the past month and the severity to which the hassle was experienced.

Parental Symptoms. The Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R) (Derogatis, 1983) was used to assess parental psychological and somatic symptoms. It is a 90-item measure designed to assess a wide variety of symptoms.

Parental Coping. The Ways of Coping Checklist (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) was used to assess mothers' self-reports of coping with a recent stressful event. The 67 items in this measure cover a broad range of cognitive and behavioral strategies people use to manage internal and/or external demands in specific stressful encounters.

Demographics. Parents completed a demographic questionnaire concerning

their marital status, age, education, income, and number of children in the family.

Results

Mothers from single- and two-parent families and children from these two family constellations were compared on the measures described above. In order to control for the multiple comparisons, MANOVAs were run when they were appropriate, followed by univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) if a significant MANOVA was found. These analyses were followed by Multivariate Analyses of Covariance (MANCOVAs) and Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVAs) controlling for family income, as the two samples were found to differ on income. Thus, differences attributable to income rather than family constellation per se could be determined.

Means and standard deviations on the various measures for single and married mothers are presented in Table 1. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) revealed that single mothers reported more negative major life events, $F(1, 195) = 7.64, p = .006$, and more total daily hassles, $F(1, 195) = 5.80, p = .017$, than married mothers. However, once income was accounted for in the ANCOVAs single and married mothers did not differ on major life events or total daily hassles. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) indicated that single and married mothers also differed on specific daily hassles subscales, $F(6, 174) = 7.55, p < .001$, an effect that remained significant after covarying for income, $F(1, 81) = 2.73, p = .015$. Univariate ANOVAs indicated single mothers reported more family hassles, $F(1, 179) = 19.28, p < .001$, economic hassles, $F(1, 179) = 21.63, p < .001$, and health hassles, $F(1, 179) = 8.70, p = .004$. Results of the ANCOVAs indicated that, after accounting for income, single mothers still

reported more family hassles, $F(1, 170) = 7.59, p = .007$, and more health hassles, $F(1, 170) = 3.85, p = .051$.

With regard to psychological symptoms, a MANOVA indicated that single and married mothers differed in their responses to the SCL-90-R subscales, $F(9, 170) = 2.47, p = .011$, a difference that remained significant in the MANCOVA $F(1, 80) = 2.34, p = .017$. Univariate ANOVAs revealed that single mothers reported more depressive symptoms, $F(1, 178) = 8.74, p = .004$, symptoms of anxiety, $F(1, 178) = 4.66, p = .032$, and psychotic symptoms, $F(1, 178) = 9.53, p = .002$. However, ANCOVAs indicated only trends for differences on depressive symptoms, $F(1, 170) = 3.79, p = .053$, and psychoticism, $F(1, 170) = 3.15, p = .078$.

Finally, a MANOVA also indicated a difference between single and married mothers in the strategies they used to cope with stress, $F(8, 188) = 1.99, p = .049$. This difference remained significant in the MANCOVA after controlling for income, $F(1, 89) = 2.55, p = .026$. Univariate ANOVAs revealed that single mothers reported accepting more responsibility, $F(1, 195) = 5.43, p = .021$, and using more positive reappraisal, $F(1, 195) = 8.93, p = .003$. Results of the ANCOVAs indicated that, after controlling for income, single-mothers reported using more problem-solving, $F(1, 188) = 4.24, p = .041$, more positive reappraisal, $F(1, 188) = 7.07, p = .009$, and the difference in the use accepting responsibility approached significance, $F(1, 188) = 2.93, p = .089$.

Means and standard deviations for the various child measures for children in single- and two-parent families are reported in Table 2. With regard to stressful events, ANOVAs did not indicate significant differences between the groups on either major or daily stressful events on the APES. Further, a MANOVA did not show any significant differences

between the groups on the life event subscales of the APES. These results were unchanged in the MANCOVA and ANCOVAs. Similarly, the two groups of children did not differ on total, internalizing, or externalizing behavior problems on either the YSR or the CBCL. Nor did they differ in competence in activities, social situations, or overall competence. A MANOVA failed to reveal any differences on the subscales of the Harter Self-Perception Profile. Finally, a MANOVA failed to reveal any differences in overall coping, problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping. Again, MANCOVAs and ANCOVAs accounting for differences in family income did not reveal any differences between the two groups.

Discussion

The present study builds on prior investigations of parent and child adjustment in single and dual parent families by comparing levels of psychosocial stress, coping, and psychological symptoms in mothers and their young adolescent children. Single mothers reported more negative major life events during the prior six months and more daily hassles related to three domains of daily living: family, personal health and economics. However, when level of income was controlled for, differences in number of negative major life events and economic hassles disappeared, while differences in family and personal health hassles persisted. Further, single mothers reported more psychological symptoms related to depression, anxiety, and psychoticism with a trend remaining for higher levels of depression and psychoticism after controlling for level of income. With regard to coping, single mothers reported accepting more responsibility and positively reappraising stressful situations more often than married mothers. These findings indicate that single mothers are experiencing more stress and

adjustment difficulties than their married counterparts, even after controlling for income differences.

In contrast, the adjustment of the young adolescent children in single and dual parent families did not differ on a number of a standardized self-report and maternal-report measures of stress and emotional/behavior problems. These findings suggest that although single mothers are experiencing greater burdens associated with being a single parent, their levels of stress and symptoms are not functioning as risk factors for the adjustment of their children.

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Table 1
Major Life Events, Daily Hassles, Psychological Symptoms and Coping Scores
for Single and Married Mothers

	Single Mothers		Married Mothers	
	M	SD	M	SD
Negative Life Events	10.00	8.99	5.83	7.50 **
Daily Hassles				
Total	49.63	38.75	31.88	26.16 *
Work	1.76	2.57	1.82	3.16
Practical	8.48	8.29	7.32	5.64
Setting	1.38	2.56	0.97	1.56
Family	6.10	4.44	3.20	2.99 ***
Economic	11.41	10.24	4.91	6.08 ***
Health	5.76	6.88	3.22	3.56 **
Psychological Symptoms				
Global Symptoms Index	0.75	0.59	0.60	0.50
Somatic	0.54	0.66	0.44	0.42
Obsessive-Compulsive	0.68	0.61	0.58	0.52
Interpersonal Sensitivity	0.82	0.73	0.65	0.61
Depression	1.07	0.80	0.67	0.66 **
Anxiety	0.71	0.69	0.48	0.54 *
Hostility	0.56	0.65	0.56	0.59
Phobic Anxiety	0.22	0.56	0.14	0.36
Paranoia	0.66	0.79	0.47	0.51
Psychoticism	0.52	0.60	0.26	0.40 **

Table 1 (continued)

	Single Mothers		Married Mothers	
	M	SD	M	SD
Coping				
Confrontive	0.66	0.40	0.68	0.54
Distancing	0.86	0.45	0.71	0.49
Self-Control	1.10	0.54	0.96	0.52
Social Support	1.08	0.68	1.05	0.65
Accept Responsibility	0.85	0.60	0.59	0.57 *
Escape-Avoidance	0.70	0.57	0.59	0.46
Planful Problem-Solving	1.31	0.74	1.09	0.72
Positive Reappraisal	1.27	0.56	0.91	0.64 **

Table 2
Major and Daily Stressful Events, Perceived Competence, Coping, and Maternal
and Self-Reported Emotional/Behavioral Problems for Children in Single- and
Two-Parent Families

	Single-Parent Families		Two-Parent Families	
	M	SD	M	SD
Stressful Events				
Major Events	16.07	17.02	14.10	14.31
Daily Events	30.33	23.56	31.92	25.17
Youth Self-Report				
Total Behavior Problems	51.76	10.80	50.68	10.61
Child Behavior Checklist				
Total Behavior Problems	54.11	7.82	55.84	9.76
Perceived Competence				
Scholastic	2.89	0.65	2.99	0.66
Social Acceptance	3.01	0.72	2.96	0.68
Athletic	2.83	0.77	2.93	0.69
Physical Appearance	2.40	0.74	2.70	0.74
Behavioral Conduct	2.94	0.65	3.09	0.59
Global Self-Problem	2.93	0.64	3.09	0.67
Coping				
Problem-Focused Alternatives	3.88	2.89	4.16	2.64
Emotion-Focused Alternatives	1.68	1.63	1.58	2.16
Problem-Focused	2.52	2.33	2.08	1.85
Alternatives Used				
Emotion-Focused	0.92	1.08	0.88	1.38
Alternatives Used				